

Thomas Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, January 17, 1810, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO JOHN WAYLES EPPES J. MSS.

Monticello, January 17, 1810.

Dear Sir, —Yours of the 10th came safely to hand, and I now enclose you a letter from Francis; he continues in excellent health, and employs his time well. He has written to his mamma and grandmamma. I observe that the H. of R. are sensible of the ill effects of the long speeches in their house on their proceedings. But they have a worse effect in the disgust they excite among the people, and the disposition they are producing to transfer their confidence from the legislature to the executive branch, which would soon sap our constitution. These speeches, therefore, are less and less read, and if continued will cease to be read at all. The models for that oratory which is to produce the greatest effect by securing the attention of hearers and readers, are to be found in Livy, Tacitus, Sallust, and most assuredly not in Cicero. I doubt if there is a man in the world who can now read one of his orations through but as a piece of task-work. I observe the house is endeavoring to remedy the eternal protraction of debate by setting up all night, or by the use of the Previous Question. Both will subject them to the most serious inconvenience. The latter may be turned upon themselves by a trick of their adversaries. I have thought that such a rule as the following would be more effectual and less inconvenient.

“Resolved that at [viii.] o'clock in the evening (whenever the house shall be in session at that hour) it shall be the duty of the Speaker to declare that hour arrived, whereupon all debate shall cease. If there be then before the house a main question for the reading or

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passing of a bill, resolution or order, such main question shall immediately be put by the Speaker, and decided by yeas and nays.

“If the question before the house be secondary, as for amendment, commitment, postponement, adjournment of the debate or question, laying on the table, reading papers, or a previous question, such secondary, [or any other which may delay the main question,] shall stand *ipso facto* discharged, and the main question shall then be before the house, and shall be immediately put and decided by yeas and nays. But a motion for adjournment of the house, may once and once only, take place of the main question, and if decided in the negative, the main question shall then be put as before. Should any question of order arise, it shall be decided by the Speaker *instanter*, and without debate or appeal; and questions of privilege arising, shall be postponed till the main question be decided. Messages from the President or Senate may be received but not acted on till after the decision of the main question. But this rule shall be suspended during the [three] last days of the session of Congress.”

No doubt this, on investigation, will be found to need amendment; but I think the principle of it better adapted to meet the evil than any other which has occurred to me. You can consider and decide upon it, however, and make what use of it you please, only keeping the source of it to yourself. Ever affectionately yours.